CHAPTER 6

THE CASE FOR COLLUSION

The Investigation

2016–PRESENT

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The ongoing investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia has become one of the most persistent stories among his administration's many scandals. What began as a probe under FBI Director James Comey into the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 election has evolved into a wide-ranging investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into everything from Donald Trump's business history to the vehicles through which foreign governments secretly inject money into American politics.

THE EARLY MONTHS

As Trump's inauguration neared, the investigation into his campaign and transition team accelerated. On January 6, the intelligence community briefed Trump on its report regarding Russian interference in the election. The declassified report, released the same day, was the first public assessment to assert that Russia "developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump" and sought not only to undermine Clinton's campaign but also to actively support Trump's candidacy.

Then, on January 10, CNN reported that the intelligence community had briefed the president-elect on the contents of the Steele dossier; that night, *BuzzFeed News* published the document. Trump responded almost immediately, decrying it via a tweet as "FAKE NEWS – A TOTAL POLITICAL WITCH HUNT!"

Cohen, who the dossier alleges traveled to Prague to facilitate collusion with Russia, also responded, calling the dossier "ridiculous on so many levels" and denying the allegations. He initially sued *BuzzFeed* and Fusion GPS, which financed the dossier, for libel, but dropped the suit amid reports that Mueller has evidence that Cohen did travel to Prague in 2016. Since the dossier's publication, other individuals named in the document, including Page and Trump's body guard Keith Schiller, have also denied its allegations. The next day, at his only press conference during the transition, Trump vehemently denied the contents of the dossier, attacking its claims regarding Russian kompromat and calling CNN "fake news" and *BuzzFeed* a "failing pile of garbage." Trump did acknowledge during the press conference that Russia had hacked the DNC and John Podesta's emails, but added, "I think we also get hacked by other

countries and other people."

By the time Trump took office, the investigation was widening. On January 19, the day before his inauguration, *The New York Times* reported that U.S. intelligence agencies were examining "intercepted communications and financial transactions as part of a broad investigation into possible links between Russian officials and associates" of Trump. Officials who spoke to *The New York Times* reportedly identified Page, Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort, and Roger Stone as among the Americans under investigation.

The FBI began interviewing members of the Trump administration and campaign during Trump's first week in office. On January 24, 2017, the FBI interviewed then-national security adviser Lt. Gen. Flynn about his conversations with Kislyak; two days later, acting Attorney General Sally Yates warned White House counsel Don McGahn that she believed Flynn was potentially compromised. On January 27, the FBI interviewed George Papadopoulos about his contacts with Maltese professor Joseph Mifsud. Both Papadopoulos and Flynn have pleaded guilty for lying to the FBI in these conversations.

Almost immediately, Trump tried to stymie the investigation. Having already asked FBI Director Comey during the transition to publicly announce that Trump was not under investigation, the president asked him to do so again on January 27. The same day, Trump fired Yates, reportedly for refusing to enforce his unconstitutional travel ban. After Flynn resigned, Trump reportedly met with Comey and pressured him to drop the agency's investigation into Flynn, saying, "I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go."

Meanwhile, Attorney General Jeff Sessions began coming under fire for his remarks about the Trump campaign's contacts with Kremlin-linked individuals. Asked about the topic during his confirmation hearing on January 10, 2017, Sessions had said, "I am not aware of any of those activities. I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I did not have communications with the Russians." After he was confirmed on February 8, 2017, multiple outlets reported that Sessions not only knew of the campaign's Russian contacts but had in fact personally met three times with ambassador Kislyak. Shortly after his confirmation, Sessions announced that, due to his involvement with the Trump campaign, he would be recusing himself from the Justice Department's investigation into Russian interference.

Trump has repeatedly fulminated about Sessions' recusal. According to *The New York Times*, before Sessions recused himself, Trump instructed McGahn to lobby Sessions not to do so. Trump has subsequently attacked Sessions publicly on multiple occasions, calling his attorney general "beleaguered" and telling *The New York Times* that, had he known Sessions would not be able to participate in the investigation, Trump would never have appointed him to the position.

INVESTIGATION AND OBSTRUCTION

As the investigation has proceeded, so have Trump's attempts to derail it, with increasing help from congressional Republicans. On March 4, Trump claimed on Twitter that, during the election, President Obama surveilled Trump's campaign, saying, "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" and "How low has President Obama gone to tapp (sic) my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!"

For two weeks, the Trump administration scrambled to defend the baseless accusation. As

Obama administration officials dismissed the claim, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer asserted that, because the words *wires tapped* were in quotes in the initial tweet, Trump was referring not to actual wiretapping but to general surveillance. Spicer also alleged the Obama administration had asked the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the British intelligence agency, to spy on Trump's campaign, which GCHQ called "utterly ridiculous" and "nonsense."

On March 21, Devin Nunes (R-CA), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, mounted his own effort to legitimize Trump's accusation. On the morning of March 23, Nunes held a press conference on Capitol Hill where he said he had just informed Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) that he had received information from a "whistleblower" indicating that Trump and his associates had been "incidentally swept up" in legal foreign surveillance by American spy agencies and that Obama administration officials had improperly "unmasked" Trump associates. Nunes then went to the White House to "brief Trump on his findings," which was followed by another press conference. Trump later said Nunes "somewhat" vindicated his claims that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower.

But Nunes's story quickly unraveled. It was soon revealed that the previous night, Nunes had reportedly received a communication on his phone while in an Uber car with a staffer. He immediately got out of the car and reportedly went to the White House, where he received intelligence reports from two White House lawyers and a National Security Council staffer. Facing an ethics investigation into his handling of sensitive material, Nunes announced on April 6 that he would be recusing himself from his committee's investigation into Russia.

The Russia investigation reached a turning point in May 2017. On May 3, Comey testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee about the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia was responsible for the DNC hack. Having confirmed in previous testimony in March that the FBI was carrying out a counterintelligence investigation into the Trump campaign, Comey refused to comment on the bureau's investigation into the Trump campaign. He also reportedly asked the Justice Department that week for additional staff to accelerate the probe.

Trump then made his most brazen move to undermine the investigation. According to *The New York Times*, on May 5, 2017, an aide for the Justice Department began asking congressional staffers for damaging information on the FBI Director. Then, on May 9, Trump abruptly fired Comey.

The administration's initial justification was a letter from Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein reviewing the FBI's handling of the investigation into Clinton's private email server. The letter, which argued that the FBI, and Comey especially, was unnecessarily harsh in its treatment of Clinton, directly contradicted Trump's repeated calls for Clinton to face criminal prosecution over the matter.

The official explanation fell apart as Trump repeatedly admitted he fired Comey in order to impede the Russia investigation. On May 10, the day after firing Comey, Trump met privately in the Oval Office with Kislyak and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, to whom he described the former FBI Director as "crazy, a real nut job" and bragged that firing Comey had "taken off" the "great pressure" the investigation had created. On May 11, Trump told NBC's Lester Holt he had planned to fire Comey over "this Russia thing" regardless of Rosenstein's conclusion. Rosenstein later confirmed in a closed-door Senate briefing that he had known Trump intended to fire Comey before writing the letter.

That same day, *The New York Times* reported that Trump had asked Comey three times to publicly announce that the FBI was not investigating Trump, and that Comey had prepared detailed memos describing their interactions. In response, Trump implied he had recorded the conversations, tweeting, "James Comey better hope that there are no 'tapes' of our conversations before he starts leaking to the press!" It wasn't until more than a month later, two weeks after Comey testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee about the meetings, that Trump admitted that he had not, in fact, recorded their conversations. He has since insisted, without any evidence, that Comey should face prosecution for leaking classified information and lying to Congress, claims the White House has yet to retract.

In April 2018, Comey's memos became public; the identity of who leaked the memos remains unknown. In the documents, Comey described the conversations as largely monologues from Trump in which he repeatedly cycled back, unprompted, to talk about the Russia investigation. Along with the details that had previously been leaked to the press, the memos note that Trump repeatedly brought up the allegation in the Steele dossier that the Russian government obtained kompromat on Trump during his 2013 trip to Moscow. The memos said Trump claimed he could not have consorted with prostitutes because he did not stay in the city overnight. This claim, which Trump denies having made in the first place, was quickly debunked, as flight records, other individuals present, and contemporaneous social media posts all confirm he was in Moscow for almost two full days.

THE MUELLER INVESTIGATION

Trump's decision to fire Comey quickly backfired. Eight days later, amid calls for an independent investigation free from the possibility of presidential interference, Rosenstein appointed the former FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III as special counsel. Comey later testified that he decided to leak the memos about his meetings with Trump specifically to ensure that a special counsel would be appointed.

Congressional Republicans initially praised the appointment. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said he "had a lot of confidence in Bob Mueller;" Speaker of the House Paul Ryan said he "welcome[d Mueller's] role at the Department of Justice;" and Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Richard Burr (R-NC) said he saw the Russia investigation "as a positive thing, especially having Bob Mueller involved. It brings a lot of public credibility to whatever process they go through."

As the investigation has proceeded, however, Republicans have become more critical of Mueller and the Justice Department. In November 2017, after Mueller had already indicted Manafort, Manafort's deputy campaign chairman Rick Gates, and Papadapolus, three Republican lawmakers introduced a bill calling for Mueller to step down, alleging he could not be impartial due to his history at the FBI and his relationship with Comey. Further criticism came in December 2017, when it was revealed that two FBI agents who had worked on Mueller's team had criticized Trump in private texts, sparking allegations that, although the agents were no longer on Mueller's team and had criticized Democratic officials as well, the investigation was compromised. Moreover, despite multiple indictments from the Mueller investigation, listed below, the first—and so far only—criminal charges recommended by either the House's or the Senate's investigations were against Christopher Steele, alleging he lied to the FBI about his contacts with the media.

Republicans' most blatant attempt to undermine Mueller came, again, from Nunes. In January 2018, Republican staff on the House Intelligence Committee prepared a memo claiming the FBI

mishandled an application for a warrant to surveil Carter Page. The FBI, they alleged, failed to disclose to a foreign intelligence surveillance court that Steele received funding from political sources; they further alleged that the investigation into the Trump campaign's collusion with Russia wouldn't exist without the dossier. Therefore, they claimed, the whole investigation was illegitimate. Republican politicians—along with WikiLeaks, Russian bots and trolls, and conservative commentators such as Sean Hannity—began calling upon Congress and the White House to "#ReleaseTheMemo." Over objections from congressional Democrats, the Justice Department, and some elected Republicans, the House GOP soon voted to send the memo to the White House, which quickly declassified the information.

The memo's central claim—that the DOJ had not revealed that Steele had received funding from political sources—fell apart when it was subsequently revealed that the DOJ had, in fact, disclosed the origin of the dossier's funding. Nunes later admitted he overlooked the information because it was in a footnote. Moreover, the memo's final paragraph contradicted the whole purported reason for the memo, acknowledging that the FBI began investigating after Papadopoulos told an Australian diplomat about his conversations with Mifsud. And the revelation that the court renewed the FBI's warrant to surveil Page multiple times demonstrated not Justice Department overreach but rather, that courts had sufficient reason to believe Page was a Russian asset and therefore warranted continued surveillance.

House Democrats, meanwhile, prepared their own memo rebutting Nunes's. After the White House at first blocked the memo's publication, it released the memo on February 24, 2018. Along with disputing many of Nunes's assertions, the Democrats memo revealed that the FBI interviewed Carter Page in March 2016, the month he joined Trump's campaign.

On March 12, House Republicans voted to conclude their investigation, claiming not only that they had not found evidence of collusion but also that that there was no evidence that Russia had supported Trump. In response, Democrats on the committee released a report detailing the many gaps in the investigation. A Moscow Project analysis of the report determined that the committee failed to interview or received insufficient information from participants in 81 percent of the meetings between the Trump campaign and transition team and Russia-linked individuals that had so far been revealed. The final report the committee published on April 27 only reinforced the House Republicans' complicity in Trump's cover-up, going so far as to suggest a repeal of the Logan Act, the 200-year-old law banning freelance foreign policy of the kind Lt. Gen. Flynn conducted during the transition.

Congressional Republicans' attempts to stymie the Russia investigation didn't end with their report. They have continually worked to legitimize the conspiracy theory that the FBI, in cahoots with the Obama administration and the Clinton campaign, began the Russia investigation to undermine Trump's candidacy. In the process, Republicans have attacked individuals within the intelligence and law enforcement community who they perceive to be responsible for the Russia investigation.

One of their most prolonged targets was Peter Strzok, an FBI official who worked on both the Russia probe and the investigation into Clinton's private email server. During the election, Strzok sent Lisa Page, a fellow FBI agent with whom he was engaged in an extramarital affair, text messages in which he was critical of Trump. Strzok's involvement with the Russia investigation ended in the summer of 2017, when Mueller learned of the texts. However, Republicans continued to claim that Strzok's personal opinions irreparably tainted the probe. Though a report by the Justice Department's inspector general found no evidence that Strzok's opinions affected the investigations, and in fact suggested that other agents' animosity toward

Clinton did, Republicans—including Trump, who has tweeted about Strzok 37 times—continued to hound him, including bringing him in to testify in a public hearing. The FBI ultimately fired Strzok in August 2018.

Strzok is not the only investigator to have drawn Republicans' ire. Trump has repeatedly attacked Justice Department lawyer Bruce Ohr, whose wife works for Fusion GPS, the private investigations firm that hired Steele for the work that ultimately produced his dossier. Despite the total lack of evidence that Ohr—a longtime civil servant whose career includes multiple investigations of Russian oligarchs and organized criminals—breached department protocol in any way, Republicans have attempted to smear him by casting aspersions on his professional relationship with Steele. As with Strzok, congressional Republicans ultimately brought Ohr in to testify, albeit in a closed session, during which Ohr reportedly testified that Steele told him in 2016 that Russian intelligence believed it had Trump "over a barrel."

Ohr has also been a chief target of one of Trump's efforts to attack critics and investigators by stripping them of their security clearances. The administration first floated the idea of stripping Obama-era intelligence community officials of their clearances in July 2018. (Former intelligence community leaders typically retain their clearances so they can advise their successors.) On August 15, Trump began to follow through on the threat by stripping former CIA Director John Brennan of his clearance, claiming he had exhibited "erratic conduct and behavior." Consensus quickly emerged that Trump had made the decision to punish Brennan for his outspoken criticism of Trump, particularly regarding Russia; Brennan has at times appeared to allude to damning evidence the American public has not yet seen, including in a *New York Times* op-ed published the day after the White House announced it would be revoking his clearance. The administration later revealed that it had a list of others whose security clearance Trump was considering revoking—including Ohr, a sign that Trump is willing to attack sitting public servants he perceives as disloyal.

Despite having seen the gambit backfire with the Nunes memo, Republicans have also continued trying to wield selective declassification as a weapon against the Russia investigation. In July 2018, the Trump administration declassified the warrants submitted to secure surveillance of Carter Page. As with the Nunes memo, the document ended up reinforcing, rather than undermining, the legitimacy of the Russia investigation: It demonstrated not only that the FBI had followed proper protocols—including by disclosing the political origin of the Steele dossier—but also that, beginning shortly after his work on the Trump campaign, multiple Republican-appointed judges had found sufficient evidence that Page was a foreign asset to renew surveillance. Nevertheless, Republicans have continued pushing to declassify more documents, including additional documents regarding Page and Ohr.

Absent a mechanism to depose Mueller themselves, congressional Republicans instead targeted Rosenstein, who directly oversaw the Mueller investigation after Sessions announced his recusal. After months of fulmination by both the president—who reportedly considered firing Rosenstein in April 2018 but backed off after Rosenstein assured him he was a "subject" and not a "target" of the investigation—and rank-and-file GOP members, 11 congressional Republicans, led by Mark Meadows (R-NC) and Jim Jordan (R-OH), introduced articles of impeachment against Rosenstein. The articles were entirely unfounded: Along with repeating numerous debunked assertions from the Nunes memo, they held Rosenstein accountable for actions taken by the Justice Department in October 2016, several months before Rosenstein became deputy attorney general. Amid significant criticism, including from Republican leaders in Congress, the members backed down, but threatened to resume the push after the 2018 midterms.

Far from hiding their efforts, congressional Republicans made impeding oversight of Trump a centerpiece of their 2018 midterm strategy. At a closed-door fundraiser for Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA), one of the senior-most Republicans in the House, Nunes told donors that a Republican majority is the only thing protecting the Trump administration from real oversight. Additionally, Axios obtained and published part of a list that has "circulated through Republican circles on and off Capitol Hill—including at least one leadership office" enumerating probes they expected Democrats to begin or to pursue more aggressively were they to resume control of the House in this year's midterms. These probes included several strands of the Russia investigation, which in effect acknowledged that Republicans have been trying to stymie attempts at meaningful oversight. After the 2018 midterms, during which Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives, members of Democratic leadership announced that they intended to pursue many of the investigative avenues Republicans had ignored or blocked over the previous two years, including by sending 64 subpoenas and more than 100 oversight letters Republican leaders had refused to send to the White House.

Trump, too, repeatedly tried to directly undermine or end Mueller's investigation. Publicly, he told *The New York Times* that Mueller should not be allowed to scrutinize Trump's finances, and that investigating the Trump Organization would be a "violation." After months of calling the investigation a "witch hunt" on Twitter, Trump criticized Mueller by name for the first time via a tweet on March 18, 2018 just days after *The New York Times* reported that Mueller had subpoenaed documents from the Trump Organization. Trump has also said he believes the investigation makes the United States look "very bad" and bragged about his "complete power to pardon." Trump's public protests also led to the early departure of the FBI's deputy director, Andrew McCabe, whom the president repeatedly harassed because McCabe's wife had previously run for office as a Democrat. The Justice Department ultimately fired McCabe fewer than two days before his planned retirement.

Privately, Trump reportedly attempted to fire Mueller twice, in June and December 2017. The first time, Trump backed off the decision when White House counsel Don McGahn threatened to quit. The second time, Trump reportedly changed his mind when he learned that the story prompting his decision—that Mueller was investigating the Trump Organization's deals with Deutsche Bank—was inaccurate.

Sessions announced shortly after he was confirmed to the post that he would recuse himself from matters related to the investigation because of his role on Trump's campaign, a decision Trump repeatedly criticized. On November 7, 2018—the day after Democrats won control of the House of Representatives in the midterm elections—Sessions announced that he was stepping down at Trump's request. Trump named Sessions' chief of staff Matthew Whitaker as acting attorney general until the Senate could confirm a new appointee, giving Whitaker purview over the Mueller investigation.

The appointment immediately drew heavy criticism due to Whitaker's past remarks on the Russia investigation, which reinforced suspicions that Trump had fired Sessions and chosen Whitaker in hopes of shutting down Mueller's probe. For example, in an op-ed published by CNN in August 2017, Whitaker had argued that Mueller was "going too far" by looking at Trump's finances. In a televised interview, Whitaker had effectively explained how the president, with help from a compliant acting attorney general, could stifle the special counsel investigation by cutting off its funding. Also under scrutiny were Whitaker's ties to Sam Clovis, who had worked on Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and reportedly hired Carter Page and George Papadopoulos to serve on Trump's foreign policy team. Clovis told Reuters that he considered Whitaker, who had chaired Clovis' 2014 campaign to be Iowa's state treasurer, a

"dear friend." Amid calls for Whitaker's recusal, *The Washington Post* reported that Whitaker had no plans to recuse from the investigation and intended to deny any attempts to subpoena Trump.

Legal scholars such as Neal Katyal, who had served as Obama's acting solicitor general and co-authored the special counsel regulations under which Mueller was appointed, questioned the constitutionality of his appointment. In *The New York Times*, Katyal and George Conway, a conservative attorney and the husband of top Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, argued that, because Whitaker had never been confirmed by the Senate and was appointed outside of the Department of Justice's established line of succession, Whitaker could not legally serve as acting attorney general.

Trump ultimately nominated William Barr to become his second attorney general. As with Whitaker, Barr immediately faced scrutiny over his past work and criticisms of the Mueller investigation. Much of the attention focused on an unsolicited, 19-page memo Barr had written to the Justice Department in June 2018 in which Barr described Mueller's probe into whether Trump obstructed justice "fatally misconceived." Moreover, Michael Isikoff and Daniel Klaidman of *Yahoo News* reported that the Trump administration had considered hiring Barr as a defense attorney in the spring of 2017, raising further questions about his ability to impartially oversee an investigation into the president. Barr had also told *The New York Times* in 2017 that he believed there was more basis for investigating the long-debunked anti-Clinton Uranium One conspiracy theory than the Russia investigation, that he saw nothing wrong with Trump demanding investigations into his political opponents, and that the Department of Justice was "abdicating its responsibility" by not investigating the Clinton Foundation.

Additional questions arose from Barr's previous tenure as attorney general in the waning days of George H.W. Bush's presidency. Barr played a crucial role in the conclusion of the Iran-Contra investigation, authorizing pardons for key figures such as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who had been charged with lying to Congress. At the time, Independent Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh said the pardons "demonstrate[d] that powerful people with powerful allies can commit serious crimes in high office, deliberately abusing the public trust without consequences." Barr's willingness to put his reputation on the line to protect Bush—including by referring unfounded complaints against Walsh by Senate Republicans to the Department of Justice's Criminal Division—led former Nixon speechwriter William Safire to call Barr the "cover-up general."

Barr was confirmed on February 14, 2019.

THE END OF THE MUELLER INVESTIGATION

On March 22, 2019, Mueller concluded his investigation. In accordance with the regulations under which he was appointed, Mueller submitted a report to Barr, who in turn prepared a letter to Congress detailing his "principal conclusions" from reading the report.

Barr submitted his four-page letter to Congress on March 24, 2019. In the letter, which quoted only four partial sentences of Mueller's report, Barr wrote that Mueller "did not find that the Trump campaign or anyone associated with it conspired or coordinated with Russia in its efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election." Barr also wrote that, in his report, Mueller "determined not to make a traditional prosecutorial judgment" on the question of whether Trump obstructed justice, but rather presented "evidence on both sides of the question." According to Barr, Mueller wrote that, "while this report does not conclude that the President

committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him."

In response, Barr, along with Rosenstein, took the unprecedented step of making that determination himself, writing that the evidence "is not sufficient to establish that the President committed an obstruction-of-justice offense."

Though Trump immediately claimed that Barr's letter amounted to "total EXONERATION," questions emerged almost immediately. Legal experts noted that Barr's reasoning for clearing the president of obstruction of justice followed almost exactly the same rationale as his June 2018 memo: Both argued that the absence of evidence of the president's personal involvement in an underlying crime relevant to Russian interference all but rules out the possibility that he obstructed justice. This similarity renewed criticism that Barr was not acting as a good-faith arbiter, as well as speculation that Trump had chosen Barr specifically because Barr would provide Trump with a favorable outcome.

Then, something unprecedented happened: Mueller's team leaked. After almost two years of near-total silence from the special counsel and his prosecutors, *The New York Times* reported on April 3, 2019, that members of Mueller's team had expressed to other government officials that they felt Barr's letter "failed to adequately portray the findings of their inquiry," which "were more troubling for President Trump than Mr. Barr indicated." The next day, *The Washington Post* reported that Mueller's team had intentionally prepared the report "so that the front matter from each section could have been released immediately—or very quickly," with as little need for redaction as possible.

The reports and Barr's subsequent conduct prompted further questions about Barr's credibility in handling the outcome of the investigation. In apparent response to the leaks about the report, Barr sent a second letter to Congress asserting that his letter "was not, and did not purport to be, an exhaustive recounting of" Mueller's report. Barr also wrote that his actions were dictated by his belief that it would not "be in the public's interest for me to attempt to summarize the full report"—despite his first letter explicitly saying he intended to "describe the report and to summarize the principal conclusions"—or to "release it in serial or piecemeal fashion," raising questions as to why Barr saw fit to release a four-page letter quoting only four partial sentences from a report running at least 300 pages.

In congressional testimony, Barr refused to commit to providing Congress with a full, unredacted version of the report and its underlying materials, and declined to take even basic steps toward minimizing redactions by securing clearance to release grand-jury information to Congress, instead telling Congress they would have to go to court to obtain the information. Moreover, while testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Barr appeared to lend credence to the repeatedly-debunked conspiracy theories that the Obama administration had inappropriately or illegally spied on the Trump campaign. Barr's comments led Judge Reggie Walton, who is presiding over a lawsuit seeking to obtain Mueller's report through a Freedom of Information Act request, to remark that Barr "has created an environment that has caused a significant part of the public … to be concerned about whether or not there is full transparency."

WHERE WE ARE NOW

Despite the continual efforts to discredit Mueller's investigation, the results from the probe show the legitimacy of the effort. His team has interviewed a slew of Trump associates, current and former administration members, and campaign officials, including Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Sean Spicer, Reince Priebus, and Attorney General Sessions, as well as Comey, Steele,

and Russian lobbyist and alleged former counterintelligence official Rinat Akhmetshin. Which of these interviews relate to specific criminal matters, and whether individual interviewees are subjects or targets of the investigation, remains unknown. Agents have also raided the homes of Manafort and Cohen and questioned Russian oligarchs flying into U.S. airports. As of February 11, 2019, Mueller has indicted 34 individuals and three corporations and obtained one conviction and seven guilty pleas, the details of which are as follows:

- On October 5, 2017, George Papadopoulos pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian-linked individuals during the 2016 presidential campaign. Papadopoulos pursued these contacts with the intention of connecting the Trump team to Russian government officials. He was ultimately sentenced to 14 days in prison. In October 2018, Papadopoulos repeatedly suggested he was considering withdrawing his guilty plea, claiming he now believed that his meetings during the campaign with Maltese professor Joseph Mifsud were part of a British plot to frame Papadopoulos and undermine the Trump campaign.
- On October 27, 2017, Mueller indicted Paul Manafort and Manafort's deputy and senior Trump aide Rick Gates on charges of conspiracy against the United States for their work with pro-Russian parties in Ukraine. Both men initially pleaded not guilty and were placed under house arrest. After Mueller filed new charges on February 22, 2018, Gates pleaded guilty. On August 21, 2018, in the first of two trials, Manafort was convicted on eight charges, including tax fraud, bank fraud, and concealing foreign bank accounts. He subsequently pleaded guilty to two charges on September 14, 2018. As of this writing, Mueller's and Manafort's legal teams reportedly remain in negotiations with the judge in Manafort's first trial regarding the resolution of the other charges against Manafort. Mueller has also alleged that, after pleading guilty and agreeing to cooperate, Manafort continued to lie to investigators.
- On December 1, 2017, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his contacts with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak.
- On February 16, 2018, Mueller indicted 13 Russian individuals and three Russian entities, including the Internet Research Agency, for embarking on an "information warfare" scheme to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The counts include conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. The special counsel also charged an individual named Richard Pinedo with identity fraud, to which he pleaded guilty. Pinedo sold bank account numbers used by unknown individuals to set up accounts with "a large digital payments company." The indictment of the Internet Research Agency indicated that it used social media to influence sentiment regarding presidential candidates; Pinedo's efforts appear to be related to this information warfare campaign.
- On February 20, 2018, London-based lawyer Alex van der Zwaan pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about his relationship with Paul Manafort and Rick Gates. On April 3, van der Zwaan was sentenced to serve 30 days in jail and pay a $20,000 fine.
- On June 8, 2018, Mueller released a superseding indictment of Manafort that also included charges for Konstantin Kilimnik.
- On July 13, 2018, Mueller indicted 12 Russian intelligence officials for hacking "into the computers of U.S. persons and entities involved in the 2016 U.S. presidential election," including employees and volunteers on Clinton's presidential campaign, the DNC, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.
- On November 29, 2018, Michael Cohen pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about his work

on a Trump real-estate project in Russia during Trump's presidential campaign. On December 12, he was sentenced to three years in prison for the charges and those brought by the Department of Justice.

- On January 25, 2019, Roger Stone was indicted for lying to Congress about his alleged communications with WikiLeaks during the 2016 campaign, and for obstructing justice by attempting to persuade other witnesses to lie as well. The indictment alleges that Stone reached out to WikiLeaks through intermediaries such as Jerome Corsi and Ted Malloch at the specific direction of high-ranking members of the Trump campaign. Stone has pleaded not guilty.

Mueller has also reportedly offered a plea deal to Jerome Corsi, a conspiracy theorist and longtime associate of Roger Stone. The plea agreement alleges that Corsi lied to investigators about serving as an intermediary between Roger Stone and WikiLeaks. Corsi ultimately rejected the plea agreement, claiming he did not lie to investigators about his foreknowledge of WikiLeaks, and that emails in which Corsi appeared to refer to inside information merely reflected educated guesses.

Five people implicated in broader questions of collusion and Russian influence have also been indicted by or pleaded guilty to charges brought outside the direct purview of the Mueller investigation:

- On July 16, 2018, Maria Butina, a Russian graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C., was arrested and indicted on two counts of conspiracy and acting as a foreign agent for the Russian government. According to the indictment, Butina had worked for at least four years to develop relationships within the Republican Party, including with prominent politicians and high-ranking members of the National Rifle Association. On December 13, 2018, she pleaded guilty to illegally conspiring to act as a foreign agent.
- On August 21, 2018, Michael Cohen pleaded guilty in a Manhattan federal court to eight charges, including tax evasion, bank fraud, and campaign finance violations. The charges stemmed from payoffs Cohen arranged in the fall of 2016 to ensure the silence of at least two of Trump's alleged former mistresses. Cohen testified that the payments were made at Trump's direction with the intent of influencing the 2016 election. On December 12, he was sentenced to three years in prison for the charges and those brought by the Special Counsel's Office.
- On August 31, 2018, Sam Patten, a longtime collaborator with Manafort and Kilimnik in Ukraine, pleaded guilty to violating the Foreign Agent Registration Act during his time working in Ukraine. Patten also admitted to illegally steering $50,000 from a Ukrainian politician into Trump's inaugural fund, which remains a subject of scrutiny due to unanswered questions about its ultimate dispensation.
- On October 19, 2018, the Justice Department charged the Russian national Elena Khusyaynova with conspiracy to defraud the United States for her alleged role in "Project Lakhta," a Russian influence operation aimed at the 2018 midterms. Court documents allege that the operation was funded by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who was also named in the February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian nationals as the primary funder of the Internet Research Agency. Khusyaynova was allegedly responsible for managing the finances of Project Lakhta, which was designed to "sow discord in the U.S. political system" by spreading arguments and misinformation about divisive and racially charged issues, including the Confederate flag, gun control, and protests against police brutality. Khusyaynova later responded in a video posted to the Kremlin-backed news website USA

Really denying any knowledge of the operations described in the indictment.

- On February 5, 2019, the Justice Department indicted Paul Erickson, a longtime Republican operative and Butina's boyfriend, on charges of wire fraud and money laundering. Erickson has pleaded not guilty.
- On April 11, 2019, the Justice Department indicted former Obama White House Counsel Greg Craig on charges related to his foreign lobbying work for the Ukrainian government. Craig has denied wrongdoing.

Mueller and his team reportedly demonstrated interest in Trump's finances, including by subpoenaing documents from the Trump Organization. Mueller is reportedly investigating a variety of subjects, including whether Trump's decision to fire Comey, his criticism of the FBI, and his attempts to cover up information about his campaign's interactions with Russian individuals constitute obstruction of justice; whether there was coordination between the Trump campaign's digital operations and the Russian social media campaign supporting Trump; and if Russia helped finance the Trump campaign through means such as donations to the NRA, which has acknowledged receiving some money from Russian donors but disputes any further involvement.

In the process, the investigation has highlighted not only how Russia interfered in the 2016 election but also the structural vulnerabilities that made the United States susceptible to that operation. The probe has, for instance, exposed how unregulated social media platforms can become potent tools for influence operations run not only by foreign governments but also by domestic dark money groups, and has brought new attention to the lax disclosure laws, especially in the real estate sector, that facilitate corruption in the United States and abroad.

Finally, the Russia investigation has demonstrated the United States' ongoing vulnerability to cyberattacks on its election system, a glaring flaw the Trump administration has done little to address. While Trump continues to ignore the problem, publicly express his desire for better relations with Russia, and call Mueller's investigation a "witch hunt," members of his own administration, including Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, FBI Director Chris Wray, and NSA Director Michael Rodgers, have repeatedly warned that the Kremlin and other bad actors will continue attempting to interfere in America's elections.

It is increasingly clear that the president of the United States is compromised by his relationship to Russia; the only question is how deep that relationship goes. The Russia investigation, then, continues to grow more important by the day, sounding the alarm for one of the greatest threats to American democracy in the country's history.